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NAMES AND NICKNAMES

When a North American goes to Brazil, he naturally expects to find a different set of names -- such Christian names as João, José, (j in Portuguese is not pronounced as in Spanish, but as in French, something like z in azure) Henrique, Francisco, and Fernando for men, and Maria, Helena, Dolores, Clotilde, and Teresa for women; and such surnames as Nunes, Alencar, Vieira, Andrade, and Silva. But the difference goes far beyond this. It is a difference in the character of names used, and in the manner and significance of their use.

For one thing, there is a surprising number of Biblical names, even among people not religiously inclined, and classical names among people not particularly erudite. Such names as Cicero and Pliny would seem bad enough, but one frequently meets with Ulysses, Agamemnon, Alcibiades, Themistocles, or even more unwieldy names. In the United States I have often known boys greatly embarrassed by pompous Biblical names bestowed by pious parents; but the Brazilians seem to feel nothing strange about having such names as Eliezer, Gamaliel, Bartholomew, Jeremiah or Mordecai, or even such rarely met ones as Jehoshaphat, Haggai or Elizaphan.

Brazilian society is less remote from patriarchal days than that of North America, and as a rule the families are large. Many people have a fancy for naming all the children in the family names beginning with the same letter. Another custom is to give names similar in sound. I knew one family where five girls were named respectively, Adna, Adma, Ada, Aquila, and Aquiza (all accented on the first syllable). I often wondered how they could distinguish between them in calling.

Because Brazil has always been to a large extent Roman Catholic, a special respect is shown to the names of the Holy Family, José and Maria. These two names far outweigh all others in popularity. So common are they that if you meet a man in the street, and wish to address him familiarly, as a North American might say, "Hey, Mister", you generally address him as José, or simply 'Ze'. The probability is that his name is really José, but if it is not he still does not mind, as he knows that it

might well have been. Similarly, a woman of the servant class may be addressed as Maria, or a more dignified lady as Dona Maria. Sometimes the two names are combined. I am sure that I have known dozens of girls named Maria José, and not a few boys named José Maria. I have heard of cases where all the girls in a family were named Maria, being distinguished by the second name, as Maria Angelica, Maria Celeste, Maria Dolores, and so on. Others are given names traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary, such as Maria de Lourdes, (this is extremely common) Maria da Conceição, (Mary of the Conception) Maria das Dores, (Mary of the Pains) etc.

A gentleman is properly addressed by his Christian name, preceded by Senhor, (or Doutor if he is a lawyer, or other person holding a bachelor's degree or better) and a lady is called by her Christian name preceded by Dona. Thus if a man's name is José Fernandes da Mata, You would address him as Senhor José, or perhaps as Senhor José Fernandes. He would certainly think you were crazy if you called him Senhor da Mata. Much less could his wife be called Senhora da Mata. If you want to address her, you ask her husband, "What is the name of your senhora?" and he replies, let us suppose, Dona Francisca; and that is what you call her.

Surnames do not have the decisive character among Brazilians that they have among English speaking peoples. North Americans who have business dealings with Brazilians may often have an experience like this: There is a man whom you have come to know as Henrique Capistrano. That, after making due allowance for the difference in language, seems a reasonable sort of name, and you feel that you know where you stand. Then one day someone asks you a question about Henrique Xavier, and you have no idea that the reference is to the same man, until you finally blunder on the fact that his name is really Henrique Capistrano Xavier, although you had had no reason to suspect it before. Then, perhaps months or even years afterwards, you happen to see his name written out in full somewhere, and find that it is Henrique Capistrano Xavier da Silva. Now let us suppose that Senhor Henrique marries a girl named Maria Inez Cavalcanti Vila Nova. His children might then be named as follows: Henrique Capistrano Xavier Filho, (Junior) Maria de Lourdes Capistrano Vila Nova, Artur Capistrano Cavalcanti Xavier, etc.

They would almost always keep Capistrano in the name, and usually Xavier. The rest could be any desired combination of his names and hers, or of other names that had been known in the family in the past generation or two. I remember a boy and girl that attended our school. Full brother and sister, the boy's name was Luis Vieira de Azevedo, and the girl's name was Guiomar Vieira Andrade.

Whatever name is given to the registrar, and set down on his books, that is the name, and there is no getting away from it. In Brazil, to matriculate in High School, to get married, to join the army, or almost anything else that one might wish to do, it is necessary to present a certified copy of his birth certificate. Some clerks are notoriously careless in writing the names, sometimes with amusing results. It was not uncommon to have a pupil come to school saying that his name was so and so, only to find out on the presentation of his birth certificate that it was quite different. Sometimes the ages were mixed up too, to complicate the matter further. There was one girl who came saying that her name was Maria Natalia something-or-other, which I thought was a very pretty name. But when her father secured her certificate from the registrar's office, we found that her name was written Maria Notaro. Notaro was the name of a family thereabouts, originally Italian; and the girl, who had no connection whatever with the Notaro family, was very much put out about it. However, there was nothing she could do about it, except by going through a long and expensive legal process, and therefore her name had to be Maria Notaro on all our records, and she was obliged to sign it that way on all her papers, on pain of losing her school credits.

I remember an anecdote that was told me by a Brazilian, of a man who went to make a business call on an old retired colonel, who lived in a large house, set far back among spacious gardens, with a high wall around them, and an iron gate at the front. The man, finding the gate unlocked, pushed it open and went in, as is often done in such cases. However, he was attacked by a pack of vicious dogs, and forced to climb a tree and call for help. At length the old colonel came on the scene, and asked what the man wanted, and he stated briefly his errand. The old colonel told him that that was not the proper way of dealing with a man of his position. "If anybody wants

to see me about anything", he said, "he stands at the gate and calls, 'O' Coronel'. I listen, but do not answer. Then he calls again, 'O' Coronel José'. I listen, but do not answer. Then he calls again, 'O Coronel José Bonifácio'. I listen, but do not answer. Then he calls again, 'O Coronel José Bonifácio Albuquerque'. Then I say, 'Que é que o senhor deseja?' (What do you want?) He states his errand, and if I find it convenient I call in the dogs, and ask him to come in. Now go back to the gate, and start all over."

The man went back to the gate, and the colonel went slowly back, and took his seat on the terraço. Then the calling began: "O' Coronel!" No answer. "O' Coronel José". No answer. "O' Coronel José Bonifácio". Still no answer. "O' Coronel José Bonifácio Albuquerque". "Que é que o senhor deseja?" "Meta-se no inferno", (Go to hell) came the answer, and the man went on his way. Apparently there are limits to what even a Brazilian can stand.

Among schoolboys one naturally expects to find nicknames, in any country. I was interested to see the types of nicknames that were used, and how they were applied.

There are some, of course, that are hardly to be considered nicknames, any more than Dick for Richard. A boy named João is often called Joca, and a girl named Maria is frequently called Maroca. Francisco is almost always shortened into Chico. Brazilians are not much given to puns, but one of the few I ever heard made there was on this word. I had come, with a group of schoolboys on an excursion, to a little town on the São Francisco River, shortly after midday. We found a hotel named Hotel São Francisco, and went in, hoping to find food. There was nothing available at that hour, and the hotel was nothing to boast of. One of the boys remarked, "Este é um hotel chico". (This is a Chico -- Francisco -- hotel, instead of chique, chic).

Other nicknames are derived from the original name, by the addition of a diminutive to any one of the names of the person. We had one boy named George Costa Lima, who was commonly called Costinha, a girl named Estefania was known as Faninha. This is very common, and is not properly considered a nickname.

However, there was scarcely a boy in school who was called by his real name, as the boys almost always found some sort of nickname to apply, and in the majority of cases the name appeared almost immediately on the arrival of the boy. One day at

the opening of the term a fat boy came up (a new boy, of course) and there was a group of boys standing around the entrance. One of them said, "There comes Caixa da Marcha," (the gear box of an automobile) and from that day on he was called nothing else. On another occasion a boy arrived who had a pasty sort of complexion, and some immediately sang out the name Tapioca (a sort of white pancake made of cassava root), and the name stuck to him from that day forth. Another day there came a boy accompanied by his father, a man already white headed, and who hovered round the boy like a hen with one chick. The boys immediately dubbed him Filho do Velho (Old man's son), and he went by that name as long as he stayed in school. ~~Still another was called~~ Fogo Eterno - (Eternal Fire).

But there were other nicknames, of which I never came to know the meaning nor the reason. Of these were such names as Tainha, Caforinga, and Lamachita. They appeared to be meaningless inventions of boys, but generally rather euphonious names. I had to know all these nicknames, or most of them, for if I had any occasion to speak to a boy about another boy, very often he would not know of whom I was speaking if I called the boy by his true name.

Another aspect of Brazilian names that seems strange to North Americans is the freedom with which the names of God, or of holy things are used in names of people or places. "Mother of God Boarding House" and "Immaculate Conception Drug Store" are names that stick in my memory, but there are many others. They seem to feel no sense of sacrilege in the use of such names. Even in names of persons we sometimes find them, as Terezinha de Jesus, or João de Deus (John of God).

But there are limits. I knew of a man whose wife bore him triplets, two boys and a girl. Being an agnostic, and wishing to flout his irreligion before the pious public, he named them Jesus, Judas, and Maria Madalena. I never knew the girl; both the boys attended our school for a time. They were never happy nor successful in school, and finally had to be expelled. I attributed their attitude to the sub-conscious revolt against their names. Or perhaps it was conscious; for by a universally accepted convention they were never called by their names; both teachers and pupils called them Pedro and Paulo.